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# A Tropical View of Irony and Satire in Arnim's *Isabella von Ägypten*

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The body of Arnim criticism of the past several decades stands in opposition to the reception that existed for one and one-half centuries. The reproaches of the Brothers Grimm and of Goethe set the tone for a maligning of Arnim that was not to be abandoned until the modern post-war era. The point of departure for the critical misunderstanding of Arnim lies in the apparent structural dissonance of his works; this has discouraged the audience from a painstaking reading. Recent definitions of metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, however, aid in generating a model that clarifies Arnim's use of Romantic irony and satire, and that is also important for an appreciation of structure in *Isabella von Ägypten*.

Heinrich Lausberg describes metonymy as a difference of quality and synecdoche as a difference of quantity:

Die realen Beziehungen zwischen dem metonymisch verwendeten Wort und der gemeinten Bedeutung sind qualitativer Art.<sup>1</sup>

Die Metonymie quantitativer Beziehung zwischen dem verwendeten Wort und der gemeinten Bedeutung heißt Synecdoche.<sup>2</sup>

Kenneth Burke makes use of the same distinction in demonstrating that there is no distortion in synecdochic representation:

The «noblest synecdoche», the perfect paradigm or prototype for all lesser usages, is found in metaphysical doctrines proclaiming the identity of «microcosm» and «macrocosm.» In such doctrines, where the individual is treated as a replica of the universe, and vice versa, we have the ideal synecdoche, since microcosm is related to macrocosm as part to whole, and either the whole can represent the part or the part can represent the whole.<sup>3</sup>

In Harold Bloom's application of Burke's rhetorical distinctions, it becomes evident that synecdoche is an ideal, almost transcendent relationship that is never attained in practice, but that serves as a model. In the ironized or real situation, however, the representational relationship is imperfect or metonymic, i. e. qualitative as opposed to quantitative:

I follow Kenneth Burke in seeing that the fundamental dichotomy is between irony and synecdoche ... In lyric poetry there is a crucial gap between reduction or metonymy and the part-for-whole representation of synecdoche ... The topoi

associated with metonymy are adjuncts, characteristics, and notation, all of them namings through supposed cause-and-effect. A metonymy names, but a synecdoche begins a process that leads to an un-naming.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the problematic relationship between the sign and the signified, the process of un-naming can never occur. The name is a trope and the trope is metonymic. The part is a trope of the whole and gives a distorted reduction of the whole.

This supplies an interesting relationship between the ideal and the real. Real or distorted representation is based upon some notion of what the ideal relationship might be. The encountering of insufficiency leads one to seek the perfectly proportioned *pars pro toto*. This is impossible, and one is left with the irony of discrepancy.

Such relationships are evident at the beginning of *Isabella von Ägypten* in the discussion of Bella's father, who has been innocently hanged upon a tripod. The tripod is a manifold image of the cross, which is here reflected and trebled. The tripod is «dreibeinig aber nicht dreieinig».<sup>5</sup> In this assonant pun all letters except the medial consonant *b* are identical. The one-to-one correspondence between the tripod and the Holy Trinity (*Dreieinigkeit*) is broken by the anomalous consonant. This is a linguistic example of a metonymic reduction of a model.

The old gypsy Braka commands Bella to hold a service for her slain father: «nimm diesen Wein und dieses Töpfchen mit Schmorfleisch, halte ihm ein Totenmahl» (453). This grotesquely alludes to the Last Supper, but the temporal sequence is reversed, taking place after the death of Bella's father. Also, the Christian parallels are ironized further by the fact that Bella's father, Herzog Michael, married. Allusions to Christ are distributed among Bella, whom Braka describes as «unsre einzige Hoffnung» (453), Michael, and the Mandrake that Bella creates. Michael is hanged with two others (an allusion to the Crucifixion) for having committed thievery: «er habe zwei Hähne gestohlen, und im Fortgehen habe ihn ihr Krähen verraten» (455). This theft interrupts direct analogy with Christ, which analogy is, however, taken up again in the betrayal and its association with cock-crowing. This alludes to the betrayal of Christ by Judas. The myriad of Christian images is presented in a distorted and fragmentary manner that is also anachronistic.

This illustrates the use of images as ironized embodiments of higher, more remote entities. The sign is a distortion of the signified. The use of Christian symbolism is an effective illustration of this distorting process because the reader is already aware of the ideal structure involved and can compare it to the distorted images.

There is a continuous textual attempt at parallel delineation that falls short

of one-to-one correspondence. The best textual example of this is the creation of the Golem Bella. She is an image of Bella, who is in turn an image of a higher entity. Golems are »Figuren aus Ton nach dem Ebenbilde eines Menschen abgedruckt« (507). This alludes to the creation of man from clay in the image and likeness of God. Here man acts in a divine and Promethean manner by creating in the image of individual human beings.

The Golem-maker fashions his copies from an image of the person captured by his *Kunstspiegel*:

Der Kunstspiegel steckte in einem Guckkasten und die ganze Kunst war, Bella zu demselben hinzulocken. (508)

The use of the word *Kunst* plays on the meanings of art, artifice and deception. The implication is that the act of creation is incomplete in so far as it is performed by man. The incompleteness of the copy, its paltriness in comparison with the original, constitutes the ironic moment in the creative process. The image of the *Guckkasten* is also revealing. It is said to show »eine welt im Kleinen, alle Städte, alle Völker in bunten Bildern« (508). This is a microcosm that contains a mirror, and that mirror captures an image of Bella. It is from this captured reflection that a likeness is created. This microcosm relates to the macrocosm of the real world, which, in itself, has a microcosmic relationship to a still higher macrocosm. Just as the Golem is created from an image transmitted from macrocosm to microcosm, so is Bella an image of a still higher entity.

This relationship, however, is not the perfect one-to-one correspondence of microcosm to macrocosm. According to the Golem-maker, man is not a miniature replica of God, nor is Golem a perfect miniature of Isabella:

Wenn es noch ein Paradies gäbe, so könnten wir so viel Menschen machen, als Erdenklöße darin lägen; da wir aber ausgetrieben aus dem Paradies, so werden unsre Menschen um so viel schlechter, als dieses Landes Leimen sich zum Leimen des Paradieses verhält! (509)

The implicit relationship is as follows. That which man creates compares to man, as our earth compares to the Garden of Eden. This is not a synecdochic relationship; it deals with qualitative discrepancies instead of quantitative differences. The Golem is a derivative of a human, who is in turn a derivative of a higher entity.

The ideal situation would entail the perfectly proportioned miniature reflections found in the one-to-one correspondence of microcosm to macrocosm. This would be the ideal synecdochic relationship in which the entirety of the whole is clearly reflected in each part. In the case at hand, however, the correspondence is skewed. The relationship is not one of perfect minifica-

tion, but of distorted reduction and reflection. It is thus a metonymic relationship in which a single part alludes to the whole. The perceiver must infer the whole from a study of the part. Images are distorted derivatives of spiritual entities, and one must extrapolate from these incorporations to the higher realm.

Such ironies cause misperceptions in the narrative. Characters are constantly erring because of an inability to distinguish between appearance and reality. For instance, the Golem is confused with the real Bella. In a discussion of the difficulties that Cenrio, an aid of Charles V, has in trying to differentiate between the real Bella and the Golem, the narrator tells the reader that this state of deception and ambiguity is a universal constant:

Auch hierein fand sich Cenrio heimlich wieder viel besser unterrichtet, ungeachtet ihm einige Dinge im Kopfe herumgingen, die er nicht bequem reimen konnte, vielleicht weil die Natur bloß Assonanzen machen wollte. (526–527)

The narrator is operating here with the poetological distinctions among consonance, assonance, and dissonance. Consonance is pure harmony, assonance partial harmony, and dissonance the absence of harmony, or cacophony. It is said above that nature works in assonance, or in partial or distorted correspondences. In the critical language established, these correspondences would be metonymic and not synecdochic, and the discrepancy between them is the ironic textual moment. The text imitates natural processes by dealing with assonances itself. These are series of distorted images of distorted images, sequences of anomalous relationships that form an interconnecting geodesic structure of metaphors.<sup>6</sup>

Each intersection in this structure relates to numerous other intersections, as in a model of a molecule; this effects a multivalence of metaphor. The Mandrake, for instance, denotes terrestriality, as he is a plant, sensuality, as the plant was considered to have aphrodisiac powers, and materialism, as the root was considered to be a means to wealth. The gypsies denote liberated wandering, occult practices, juggling and balancing, spirituality, non-materialism, and folk poetry. All of these connotations are employed in the text. Indeed, the near-obsessive consistency and intricateness of metaphor demonstrates that each is chosen precisely for its multivalent properties. Thus the single image is a three dimensional radiant metaphor that expands outwardly.<sup>7</sup>

These multivalent metaphors are not sequentially arranged in a pattern of cause and effect.<sup>8</sup> The work illustrates its theses not by deductive processes but via metaphors that interconnect by association.<sup>9</sup> Each image is a tropical microcosm; it is «eine Welt im Kleinen.» Just as the *Guckkasten* generated an

aberrant copy of Bella, so does a tropic image distort what it reflects. Each character is also an image that is an idiosyncratic trope of the information it receives. This is the reason for the often comic misunderstandings among characters in the text: discrepancy or irony generates humor.

Each intersection in the structural webbing is an image that gathers ambient light and reflects other images in the structure as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Each intersection is also connected, however remotely, to the whole. The ratio, however, between the whole and each image is not an analogous one, but an anomalous one. It is a metonymic correspondence of differences, distortions, and aberrations. Consequently, one is left with ironized images of, for instance, distorted Christendom.

The text seems to lack any substantial argument for a dualistic world view. The sharp contrasts and near-exclusivity of the conscious level versus the inner workings of the psyche, as one sees in Tieck's *Der blonde Eckbert* or *Der Runenberg*, are not found here. Novalis's insistence upon a marriage of nocturnal dream and diurnal sobriety is also absent here. There is no real schism between self and nature because everything is universally related, however remotely. The self can, however, be unaware of its universal connections and can also exist in a reduced relationship to the whole. It cannot, however, be apart from the whole. There seems to be little *Sehnsucht* here. One does not long for reunion but exists instead in union.

The quality of universal experience is, however, greatly reduced. The individual can be a part of the whole, but not the whole itself. The particular part is, however, a microcosmic distortion and reduction of the macrocosm, but it is still connected to it.<sup>11</sup> Thus Arnim's particular brand of Romantic irony concerns the discrepancies in part-whole relationships. It is an irony of metonyms, or incomplete synecdoches. It is not, therefore, an irony that results from self/nature or self/non-self dualism. It is similar to Schlegelian irony in that it demonstrates insufficiency and limit, but it differs by lacking the autonomy of mind characteristic of early Romanticism; it advocates the suspension of any philosophical activity. Arnimian irony is non-socratic and unintentional; it is an ontological irony, inherent in nature, that maintains a comic situation.

The individual in the Arnimian cosmos is a distorted metonym of nature. It is the individual's duty to harmonize with natural law and not to set personal above natural will. Thus the individual's duty is to extrapolate from her or his reduced experience to the ideal totality. This involves a poetic perception of terrestrial as an allegory of celestial existence, as is seen in the metonyms of Christian symbolism. In the Arnimian cosmos this perception is often thwarted by the human experience, and here begins the element of satire:

what is satirized is the folly of self-direction. Egocentrism eclipses the perception of one's participation (however reduced) in the cosmos. In innocuous protagonist action satire is minimal, but humor is evident. This occurs because the protagonist will is consonant with natural law.

There is thus a relationship here between irony and humor: in protagonist behavior, the ideal is sensed and striven after, but the problematic nature of real action causes a shortfall. The discrepancy is often comic and includes the reversal of expectations that is often noted as a conventional characteristic of irony. When the antagonist will is at odds with nature, however, satire is strong. Satire is thus used as an invective exposing the vanity of the willful antagonist.

When willful behavior is satirized, it is invariably authoritarian, imperialist behavior. In *Isabella*, this is incorporated in the figure of the Mandrake, a poor derivative of a human, who cannot see behind appearances, as is evident in a scene where he has been tied underneath an oven:

Der Kleine, der schwebend angebunden hing und unter sich die Fliesen sah, die ein Meer mit Schiffen darstellten, glaubte in seinem Halbrausche, er fliege über dem Meere, und wollte sich damit sehen lassen. Als ihm aber die Bande gelöst wurden und er mit der Nase auf dieses Meer fiel, da glaubte er sich verloren. (539)

The Mandrake takes illusion for reality, gets lost in the particular image that confronts him, and loses relation to the general structure. He would rather cling to his particular niche. His empirical attention eclipses the general faith necessary to sustain his fall, and his lack of holistic perception is satirized in the comic and base image of falling on his nose.

Willful behavior is also satirized in the character of Charles V, the last papally crowned Holy Roman Emperor. An active counter-reformationist, he attempted to orchestrate the religious reunification of Europe. His expansionism contrasts with Isabella, who subordinates her will to nature and becomes inspired and motivated suprapersonally by natural law.

The satirical representation of Charles's endeavors consists in the fact that he inadvertently brings about the ultimate execution of the natural forces that he is trying to conquer. The narrator characterizes Charles's hubris:

Solch ein Grauen wohnt in der Tiefe des hochmütigsten Menschen vor der unnennbaren Welt, die sich nicht unsern Versuchen fügt, sondern uns zu ihren Versuchen und Belustigungen braucht. (461-462)

There is a contrast between Bella's submission to forces greater than the self and Charles's resistance to these forces. His resistance is indicated in his opposition to the dream state, which is here a state of indeliberate communication with higher forces. This is evident

als der Erzherzog aus dem bänglichen Schlusse seines Herrschertraumes zum Lichte aufwachte, das allen Träumen mit den kecken Worten entgegenzutreten scheint: ihr seid nicht wahr, denn ihr besteht nicht vor mir! – da meinte auch er, alles Traurige, was ihn bedroht, sei ein Hirngespinnst gewesen. Wer spinnt aber im Innern unsres Hirnes? Der die Sterne im Gewölbe des Himmels in Gleichheit und Abwechselung bewegt! (544)

This passage indicated that Charles impudently rejects cooperation in the reduced *unio mystica*. In doing so he attempts to withstand the forces that determine his behavior.

This is also seen in another passage in which Charles dreams of a chain and fears that

die goldne Kette, worin er die Völker führte, ihm selbst, der sie hielt, immer enger sich um den Fuß wickelte, daß er dadurch zu fallen fürchtete; darum stieß er sie von sich. Sie aber fühlte das im bewegten Gemüte anders und sprang leicht aufs Fenster und zu den Ihren herab. (548–549)

In this passage Bella misinterprets Charles's actions and believes that he is pushing her out of rejection. He is afraid of being dethroned from his imperial position, whereas she has no such fears and is prepared to relinquish control. Charles, on the other hand, attempts to exert self-centered control over the situation. Her leap is a literal one of faith and is precipitated by her having been pushed away by Charles: thus he unconsciously precipitates Bella's reunion with the gypsies, which is the *eschaton* of the text, and which spoils his own designs.

A satirization of Charles's attempts at analysis and control occurs when he spies on Bella in an adjacent room. He asks Cenrio, his aid, to fetch a drill:

Dieser hatte in aller Eile den Anbrechbohrer eines Weinkupers, der im Hofe ein Ohmfaß abgezogen hatte: das ging vortrefflich; ganz leise konnte er durch die Türe dringen, bis der erste feine Punkt der Spitze hindurchsah, während sein Auge sich in die breite Höhlung einlegen konnte. (499)

The attitude of Charles is a piercing attention to detail. This is the suspicious orientation of the empiricist who is deceived by appearances. Ironically, Charles's attempts to increase his perceptive power by this microscopic device actually generate the misperceptions that he is trying to avoid. He sees the Mandrake together with Bella and assumes he has been betrayed by her: «weil er sich von neuem verraten glaubte, doppelt verraten» (506). With dispassionate skepticism like that of St. Thomas the Apostle, who inserted his finger into the wounds of Christ, Charles curiously pierces the translucent membrane of image, disrupts the shadow-play of appearance, and foils his own aims.

Because the individual perceives only metonyms of universal structure,



there ensues a discrepancy between intent and result. Here irony generates humor in showing the inefficiency of action. Irony turns to satire when the willful individual ignores metonyms of truth and tries to shape destiny; satire insures that the manipulator is manipulated.

Thus irony and satire have ontological functions. The former constitutes the discrepancy between metonymy and synecdoche; the latter belittles the ego that ignores the metonymic connections between self and cosmos. Both tropes operate in nature inherently and immanently.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (München: Huber, 1960), p. 292.
- <sup>2</sup> Lausberg, p. 295.
- <sup>3</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1969), p. 508.
- <sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom, «The Breaking of Form,» in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Achim von Arnim, *Sämtliche Romane und Erzählungen*, ed. Walther Migge (München: Hanser, 1965), II, p. 453. All primary quotations are taken from this edition.
- <sup>6</sup> cf. Wolfdietrich Rasch, «Achim von Arnims Erzählkunst,» *Deutschunterricht*, 7 (1955), pp. 38–55.
- <sup>7</sup> cf. Horst Meixner, *Romantischer Figuralismus: Kritische Studien zu Romanen von Arnim, Eichendorff und Hoffmann* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1971), pp. 76–77.
- <sup>8</sup> cf. Bruce Duncan, «Fate and Coincidence in Arnim's *Seltsames Begegnen und Wiedersehen*,» *Seminar*, 15 (1979), pp. 181–189.
- <sup>9</sup> cf. Albert Béguin, *L'âme romantique et le rêve*, (Paris: Corti, 1939), p. 250.
- <sup>10</sup> cf. Lawrence O. Frye, «Mesmerism and Masks: Images of Union in Achim von Arnim's *Hollins Liebeleben* and *Die Majoratsherren*,» *Euphorion*, 76 (1982), p. 86.
- <sup>11</sup> cf. Frye, «Mesmerism,» p. 86.